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Local park poses health hazard: agency

Park official disputes some agency findings

Visiting Saw-Wee-Kee Park off Sundown Lane near the Fox River could be hazardous to your health.

That's the conclusion reached this past week by the Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry (ATSDR), an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, following two recent inspections of the 160 acre park situated southwest of Oswego.

At the request of a group of nearby property owners, ATSDR officials discovered "numerous physical hazards" located on the park property, including empty drums, broken glass, old farming equipment, medical debris (including empty syringes, partially empty medical bottles) and partially buried 55 gallon drums.

In a four page report, ATSDR officials noted the physical hazards are located in areas of that are accessible to persons

frequenting the park.

As a result of the findings, the agency recommends that public access be restricted from areas of the park that contain the physical hazards and debris, and that the type and extent of contamination in the park should be "better characterized to assist in determining the potential current and future" threat to human safety.

The ATSDR also urged that nearby private water wells be sampled to ensure their safety.

Park District Director Bert Gray reported Monday that he and other park district officials are concerned about the ATSDR's findings and considering posting signs warning people about potentially dangerous areas in the park.

Gray, however, said he does not believe park visitors need to worry about the debris posing a threat to their health and said there is no plan to close the park to the public. He added that there is no way of knowing how many people annually visit the park.

Gray noted that the areas where the debris was found are located along trails in the park, away from the park's road

and a riverbank boat launch.

Gray also disputed the ATSDR's reported discovery of syringes among the debris as "totally incorrect."

Gray stated that an ATSDR official has assured him that mentions of the syringes will be "publicly retracted" from the agency's report.

He also noted that the areas of debris cited by the ATSDR are focused on the portions of the park that were previously used as a municipal garbage dump between 1948 and 1966. The State of Illinois deeded the park property to the district in 1963.

Gray indicated that the areas cited by the ATSDR in the report "account for less than 10 percent of the park site."

Since assuming ownership, the district has maintained the heavily wooded property as a nature preserve, constructing the hiking and horseback riding trails and last year installed the boat launch and small picnic area near the park's entrance.

The ATSDR's report was announced less than four months after the Oswegoland Park District paid more than \$25,000 to have 59 barrels of dried paint

removed from a section of the park. Tests of paint samples from one of the barrels by the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA) early last year determined that it contained lead in excess of federal standards and was classifiable as a hazardous waste.

In a related matter, Gray reported that investigatory trenching May 27 of a 130 foot area in the park that had been filled with the park district's approval in recent years produced "very satisfactory" results.

Gray said trenches in three separate locations in the park "turned up a predominance of topsoil, clay and gravel." He said five pieces of trash, the largest being two old tires, were removed from the nearly 400 cubic yards of excavated soil.

The trenching was completed at the request of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA). Witnessing the operation were officials from the park district and the U.S. and Illinois EPAs and concerned neighbors.

The park district had authorized the filling to provide horse trailer parking, Gray reported. The filling, however, was stopped in February 1991 when the district received a cease and desist order from the Army Corp of Engineers. The Corps declared a small portion of the filled area, .18. acres, a jurisdictional water of the U.S., requiring a permit for filling.

TO: Louise Fabinski